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ABSTRACT

The value of death education at the elementary school level is discussed. It is pointed out that death education can be helpful in preparing children to cope with death by reducing anxiety, which would enable them to adjust to future experiences. It is suggested that close cooperation between parents, school, and the community is important in implementing a death education course. Guidelines are offered for designing a death education curriculum. General attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about death common to children between the ages of 3 to 5, 6 to 8, and 9 and older are outlined, and concepts appropriate when discussing death with each of these age groups are delineated. The value of using children's books to help them deal with death related experiences is discussed, and a list of suggested resources is included. (JD)

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Elementary Death Education

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Elementary Death Education

Along with reading, writing, and arithmetic we are currently seeing the emergence of another subject area in the elementary child's curriculum--death education. Such education is important because children are not immune to personal death or experiencing the death of others be they pets, family members, or friends. Therefore death education is not an unusual topic to discuss at this age.

During childhood about one in twenty children will experience the death of a parent, and by sixteen one child in five will have lost a parent (Jones, 1977). Such situations will emotionally affect the lives of children. If the child is unable to cope with the situation it can lead to psychological problems. Thus death education is a necessity to help children cope and accept the fact of death.

Until this century children frequently viewed death. Since infant mortality was high children often witnessed the death of their brothers and sisters. Life expectancy was also short so children often witnessed the death of their parents. As medical technology became more advanced and infectious diseases and others were conquered, death did not occur until one's later years.

Today the topic of death is generally taboo in our society. Terminally ill people are often cared for in hospitals and

children are usually not allowed to visit. Old people are placed in health care institutions, again out of the sight of the young. Many times children are not exposed to death because adults find it difficult to discuss this topic. They feel such discussions will only cause unnecessary pain in the child. In spite of all efforts to protect them, children do develop concepts of death.

Children are constantly exposed to death in books, magazines, on television, and in movies. The mass media often depicts death unrealistically. A person who dies in one movie may be alive in another movie on another channel or a week later. Dr. Spock who died in his last Star Trek movie is "alive" on his old series, and selling video games on television. A favorite movie for young children was ET. Yet, even ET managed to escape death. Losing all hope for survival and pronounced dead he managed to come back to life just by knowing someone truly loved and cared for him. Talking to dead people does not bring them back yet the movie depicted that conclusion. In addition many cartoons and video games have flirtations with death.

It would be quite a task to shield children from misconceptions about death, however it is feasible to facilitate their exposure to materials which portray death in a realistic style which is appropriate to the child's level of perception, and

which encourages further levels of perception (Delisle, McNamee, & Woods, 1977).

A lack of factual information could produce an incorrect concept of death. It has been reported that a child's ideas about death can influence their emotional, psychological, as well as intellectual development. A child needs to know that grieving the death of another is normal. If a child does not express grief this could lead to immediate and long-term emotional and somatic problems (Atkinson, 1980). If grief is not expressed it can lead to academic failure, delinquency, withdrawal, fear of being alone, unwillingness to make friends, and long-term depression (Bernstein, 1977; Bendiksen, & Fulton, 1976). The latter can lead to higher rates of major illness and extreme emotional distress in adulthood (Bendiksen, & Fulton, 1976; Brown, 1961). In addition failure to cope with this problem can block a child's learning capacity (Atkinson, 1980). It has been suggested that some cases of alcoholism might be due to unresolved grief in childhood (NIAAA, 1974).

When it comes to death education a teacher may feel uncomfortable talking about such a topic to young children due to their personal fears and anxieties. Therefore, every elementary school teacher cannot qualify as a death educator. Leviton (1971)

lists some qualities which a teacher should possess before teaching about death:

1. They need to recognize their own feelings about death and how these function as a part of their total personality.
2. They need to have knowledge about death and death education.
3. They should be able to use the language of death comfortably in the presence of the young.
4. They should be familiar with developmental events throughout life and have a sincere concern for any problems occurring during these time periods.
5. They should be aware of the social changes which influence our death related attitudes, practices, laws, and institutions.

When death related questions are asked they should be received without anxiety or nervousness from the teacher. Children can sense uneasiness in adults. If the teacher is nervous or avoids the topic the child may feel uncomfortable asking questions in the future and might therefore seek the answers to their questions through peers and imagination (Pope, 1979). Fears and anxieties about death on the part of the teacher can lead to the development of similar traits in children.

When discussing death it is important to avoid confusing explanations (Crase & Crase, 1976). To say that the deceased has gone on a long journey, into a deep sleep, was taken by God because he was good, or the person died due to sickness (the child might fear all sickness leads to death) can initiate confusion and fears which will only have to be unlearned later (Grollman, 1967).

A child should learn that at the time of death life stops and that the dead person, plant, or animal will not become alive again. At this point the deceased is either buried or cremated.

A misconception which children have is that they can wish someone dead. This idea can cause much guilt and anxiety if the person upon which the death was wished dies. Children need to be aware that such thoughts cannot produce death.

Since death education is a controversial topic, community involvement in the decision to teach this subject is helpful. It can be valuable to survey community attitudes toward death first so support and resistant groups can be identified (Bennett, 1974). Freeman (1978) offers the following suggestions when initiating a death education curriculum: 1. discuss the proposed educational program with the principal or curriculum consultant who may be familiar with the feelings and possible reactions of the community to this topic, 2. plan a parent meeting to explain the content and focus of such classes and obtain parental input as to the

course content, and 3. require permission slips be signed by parents before instruction.

Bennett (1974) suggests that school curriculum materials be developed within the school district rather than using commercially produced packages. He states that the latter may not fit well into the program accepted by a particular district or locality because strategies which deal with moral, ethical, and theological considerations should be viewed in ways which are consistent with the values of the community.

Death education for the elementary school age child can be scholarly based (formal, planned) or based on acute situations (informal, unplanned) (Koocher, 1975). Informal discussions can take place at a teachable moment and at a nurturing moment (Corr, 1982). The teachable moment pertains to those situations in which a person or an animal dies that has no personal attachment to the child. Such situations can stimulate questions in the child which need to be answered in a cognitive, informative sense. Those situations which are nurturing in nature would be occasions in which a child may need to express emotions which they have toward the death of a pet, or someone, that was very dear to them. At this time the child would need emotional support and the opportunity to express their grief openly.

A child's concept of death

Children perceive death differently during various stages. It is important that adults are aware of the levels through which children view death.

Children below the age of three do not have a concept of death, however they can still experience grief in reaction to a separation from an important person (i.e., mother) (Fredlund, 1977).

In her research Nagy(1948) found that a child's perceptions of death were based upon age-maturity factors. She classified children's perceptions of death into three states based on their age:

1. Three to five - This stage is similar to Piaget's preoperational stage and it portrays the egocentricity of the child. They do not view death as a final event, but view the deceased eating, breathing, and thinking within the coffin. In addition Fredlund (1977) states that children this age see death as reversible, they believe life continues at night for the deceased either in a coffin or attic. At this age children also believe they can wish another person dead, and they believe death only occurs to those who are old. (Fredlund, 1977).

2. Six to eight - During this stage children are in a stage termed concrete operations by Piaget. It's a stage where cause

and effect relationships are understood more fully. During this time children see death as final. Nagy found that children believed that death could occur if a deathman, ghost, skeleton or boggie man took a person away. They personified death as a person who could take you away. Because they saw death as a physical being they also believed they could avoid or hide from it too.

3. Nine years and older - Children this age are in a stage of mature understanding according to Piaget. Nagy found that such children saw death as inevitable and viewed it in more realistic terms. Children realized that death could happen to anyone at any age or time and they no longer believed they could wish death upon another.

Age maturity factors are not the only way in which such attitudes develop as a child's perception of death may also be related to their intellectual development, life experiences, familiar attitudes, social class, religion, and culture.

By discussing death in the classroom a student can be exposed further to death either formally or informally. Such experiences can enable children to express their thoughts so they may be more comfortable with this topic (Mills, 1976). Mills, et al (1976) suggest that death education is important because: 1. The mental health of children depends on the recognition of tragedy. 2. Death education can aid in reducing fears and misunderstandings

which might have been learned. 3. A child's ability to cope with death may be aided if instruction and discussion in death has taken place previously.

If a classroom pet dies it is important to tell the children about this fact. It is important for them to be allowed to voice how they feel and discuss how others feel. Learning to cope with such a situation can aid them in adjusting to major losses later in life (Vollmer, 1979).

Oftentimes adults may feel uncomfortable when a pet dies. They feel awkward in approaching children with this fact. They fear what children will say or how they will react. It might seem appropriate to shield a child from the pain of death but such acts only deny the child an opportunity to grieve (Vollmer, 1979). By discussing the death the child is allowed to express their inner feelings. By opening lines of communication children can learn to feel free to talk about similar situations in the future, rather than feeling uncomfortable and holding such feelings inside.

Children can be given exercises to aid in the release of grief. They can draw a picture, write a story, or role play to aid in the release of their feelings toward the event of death.

The following are concepts which would be appropriate when discussing death in various age groups:

Three to five years

All living things will die someday.

There are certain characteristics which differentiate living and non-living things.

All living things go through several stages of life.

Dying is a natural end to the life cycle.

Death is due to physical reasons.

It is normal to experience grief.

It is natural to feel sad, guilty, fearful or want to cry when you experience the death of another.

The closer the loved one who died was to you the more difficult it might be to deal with one's grief.

Living continues although a person might experience the grief of another.

The funeral has importance for those who are grieving.

Others need love and support when someone dies.

Children can help someone who is grieving a death.

It is important to accept the feelings of people who are grieving.

Six to eight years:

The causes of death today are quite different from those years ago.

It is normal to experience various feelings when someone dies.

Death is sometimes symbolically represented by various death symbols (skull and cross bones, ghosts, bogeyman).

Death is due to physical reasons rather than a person taking you away.

Funeral customs differ in various cultures.

It is important to listen, and accept the feelings of those who are experiencing grief.

Nine to twelve

There are many ways to deal with grief feelings.

Feelings about death can be expressed through poetry, music, and art.

There are various definitions of death.

Organ donations can help others who have incurable diseases.

Certain legal procedures must be performed to certify death.

Funeral practices differ in various families and cultures.

Epitaphs and eulogies are written to give rememberance and respect to those who have died.

Obituaries and death notices inform people about the deaths of others.

Sympathy notes can be a source of comfort to those who are grieving.

There are various ways of dealing with grief feelings.

There are many different causes of death.

There are various physical stages in the process of dying.

A person can experience various psychological stages as they go

through the process of dying.

Suicidal people portray common warning signs of their intent. There are many ways in which suicide can be prevented. A person's body may be buried, cremated or donated to medical science upon their death.

Bibliotherapy

Children's books can be used to help them deal with death related experiences. Through reading a child can identify with the feelings which the characters in the book have and they can become aware of their own feelings. When children read they can allow their personal needs and problems to enter the reading experience and they can therefore have a closer encounter with death without having to experience an actual death (Klingman, 1980).

Klingman (1980) suggests that bibliotherapy, the use of literature to help children cope with death related experiences, can offer many advantages to children. A few of these advantages are 1. By identifying with the subject matter the child can express their emotions and thus experience catharsis which can ease tension and cause relaxation. 2. By relating their own personal thoughts and feelings to those of the characters the child can thus express emotions which they might not have expressed otherwise. 3. They can learn cognitive information and

problem solving techniques which might be referred to later if they are personally involved in similar situations. 4. By discussing such topics children become acquainted with the feelings and behaviors which other children have and this can reduce their personal feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Delisle, and Woods (1977) state that bibliotherapy consists of three parts 1. Identification - This occurs when the child identifies with the characters in the story either consciously or unconsciously. 2. Catharsis - This occurs when the reader has a feeling of emotional release when identifying with the characters in the story. 3. Insight- This occurs when the student looks into their own feelings, motivations and needs as they identify with the characters. When evaluating books for bibliotherapy it is important that they contribute toward the intellectual, emotional, and social needs and resources of the student (Delisle, and Woods, 1977). In regard to the intellectual component the characters should portray a model of death and reactions to it which are appropriate for the age range to which the story was written. The emotional component would pertain to the characters portraying a model which indicates that it is appropriate to feel various ways about death. The stories should also depict children being cared for after experiencing the death of others. The social component depicts death as a shared experience with others.

Klingman (1980) suggests that books be selected in accordance with the child's personality factors and the attitudes of adults in the community.

Various individuals have written suggestions for books which can be considered when teaching toward the development of death concepts (Romero, 1976; Prouty, 1976; Wass, & Shaak, 1976; Delisle, & McNamee, 1981; Delisle, Woods; 1976; Swiss, 1976; Marshall, 1975; McClenathan, 1978).

In conclusion death education can be a valuable component of an elementary child's education. It can be easier for children to cope with death when they have received adequate education in this area. Death education can reduce a child's anxiety about death and allow them to adjust to the death of loved ones in the future. Students who see death as a part of life learn to fear it less and appreciate life more. Thus learning about death can lead to a better appreciation of life.

Suggested Resources

BOOKS

Bernstein, J. Books to help children cope with separation and loss. N.Y.: R. R. Bowker, 1977.

Cook, S. et al, Children and dying: An exploration and selective bibliographies, N.Y.: Health Sciences, 1974.

Gordan, A., & Klass, D. They need to know: how to teach children about death. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979.

Grollman, E. Explaining death to children. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

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Lonetto, R. Children's conceptions of death. New York: Spring, 1980.

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Russell, R., & Purdy, C. Coping with death and dying. Glenview, Ill: Scott, Foresman, & Company, 1980.

Vogel, L. Helping a child understand death. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975.

Wass, H. Dying facing the facts. Washington: McGraw Book Company, 1979

Wass, H., & Corr, C. Helping children cope with death guidelines and resources. Washington: McGraw Hill International Book Company, 1982.

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Fox, R. An experience with values clarification. Health Education, 1979.

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Koocher, G. Why isn't the gerible moving anymore? Discussing death in the classroom--and at home. Children Today, 1975, 36, 18-21.

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Rosenthal, N. Death education: help or hurt? The Clearing House, 1980, 53, 224-226.

Simon, S., & Goodman, S. A study of death through the celebration of life. Learning, 1978, 70-74.

Vollmer, J. The passing of Muffin. Instructor, 1979, 90-91.

CURRICULUM GUIDES

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Dippo, J. Steps toward healthy growth. Health Education Curriculum Guide, Grades K-3. Homer, N.Y.: Cortland-Madison Board of Cooperative Educational Services, 1975, (ED 107-667).

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Prouty, D. Read about death? Not me! Language Arts, 1976, 53(6), 679-82.

Romero, C. Children, Death and Literature. Language Arts, 1976. 53(6), 674-78.

Swiss, T. Death education in the language arts classroom. Language Arts, 1976, 53(6), 690-99.

Vollmer, J. The passing of muffin. Instructor, 1979, 89(3), 99-100.

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